



Patrol keeps motorists SAFE

By Vanessa Overholser - Staff Writer

— Whenever a man driving a white Safe Patrol (Safety Assistance for Freeway Emergencies) truck dressed in a fluorescent lime yellow jacket and matching hat pulls up by your car, have no fear: he is one of the good guys. “It was a real experience. People don’t help people anymore. People are afraid,” said Ashland Joseph, a motorist SAFE patrol crew helped on I-64 last Monday.

SAFE patrol is a program designed to improve safety and minimize delays due to traffic accidents and vehicular operational problems. Services provided by SAFE patrol are free of charge to motorists. If a wrecker is needed, the motorist is responsible for payment.

Some services include stopping to do welfare checks on motorists parked on the shoulder of the highway. Patrol operators assist with changing tires, jump-starting vehicles with dead batteries and providing water for overheating vehicles. Operators assist motorists during emergencies by doing things such as aiding in routing traffic from accident scenes and work zones.

Operators patrol approximately 1,025 miles of Kentucky interstates and parkways daily. They are assigned to certain regions of the state and are responsible for monitoring parkways and interstates. An additional 416 miles is covered during emergency situations. A dozen trucks and one van monitor roadways and respond to incidents from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. everyday.

“We started out with a few trucks when we started this in October of 2004. It was a pilot program then,” said Department of Highways spokesman Allen Blair. “We expanded this program in Northern Kentucky and rural areas. Most all parkways and US 33 have this system.”

Since the program started there have been 11,000 calls for help statewide. Calls included people having tire trouble, gas trouble and major accidents, Blair said.

Gary Beckstrom is a Highway Safety Patrol Operator for the Department of Highways District 9 who left his job of 33 years as a warden at the West Liberty prison to work for the Transportation Department Oct. 1, 2007.

“We primarily deal with traffic around the scene,” Beckstrom said. “We are trained to administer Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) so we can stabilize a person until the ambulance arrives.”

Operators are equipped to help with minor vehicle problems only.

“We are not mechanics but have enough knowledge to get drivers back on the road,” Beckstrom said.

The trucks are equipped to administer aid to any emergency needs.

“SAFE Patrol trucks have an extended cab and are equipped with four-wheel drive and any tool needed for roadside assistance needs,” Beckstrom said. “It is designed so that operators would have access to the tools.”

Like fire trucks and semi trucks, SAFE patrol vehicles have compartments on each side of the truck, which contains equipment needed for roadside emergencies.

“Trucks are stocked with emergency gasoline, oil, battery jump packs, shovels, traffic cones, air compressor, a fire extinguisher, and a Variable Message Board that is controlled by a switch in the cab the operator raises when assisting travelers,” Beckstrom said. “First-aid supplies such as CPR masks are included.”

Worries about safety of people who are stranded on the highway are the biggest concern of all SAFE patrol operators, Beckstrom said.

SAFE patrol workers assist law enforcement by moving debris from highways and monitoring infrastructure for suspicious devices, people or activities. Also they check and tag abandoned vehicles and do not act as police officers in any way.

Their primary concern is the welfare of motorists who are stranded.

“My worst nightmare is that something would happen to the people we are helping,” Beckstrom said.

“If you are on the highway, you are in harm’s way. Motorists do not have safety in mind. It’s priority in our minds. Some motorists are thinking ‘oh gosh, I’m late getting to the mall or the airport’ and so they drive without thinking about slowing down through construction zones,” Blair said.

“It would help if people would carry safety items in their car such as blankets for winter and extra antifreeze, extra gas, a spare tire or water,” Blair said. “Always think about safety on the road.”

Operators do stress that motorists should not step out onto traffic whenever they are stranded.

“When you step out into traffic, a car traveling 70 miles per hour is traveling at a certain amount of feet at a time,” Blair said. “So if you step out into traffic, a vehicle could hit you.”

Operators get many different reactions from motorists when they arrive on the scene.

“One lady I came upon when I was on the other side of London was standing by her car. When I stopped I asked what she was doing and she said she was praying for help,” said Administration Section Supervisor Harvey Holbrook.

“I told her to hold that thought and maybe her prayer would be answered. So I started working on changing her tire,” Holbrook said.

“After I was finished she continued to thank me for helping her,” Holbrook said. “We give everyone a comment card whenever we help someone. She wrote thank you over and over several times on the card.”

“This is a highway safety program,” Blair said. “It’s not just a courtesy. This program unites all potential services to accomplish common goals. Everybody impacts safety.”

“Everything about our program is being evaluated right now,” Blair said.

“There are states that are looking at us to see how our program works,” Holbrook added.

“The program is unique from other states because the operators go to state borders to help people and others do not.

Many from out-of-state do not know that we provide that service.” Holbrook said. “For people who want to know about our program, we have brochures at rest areas.”

All emergency calls are received at a Transportation Operations Center. It is open 24/7, 365 days a year. Traffic information is entered into the 511 web site and the 511-telephone system. Information is available at www.highwaysafety.ky.gov. Having this on the website gives motorists access to traffic, weather and road conditions before traveling. This information is available at kiosks located in Welcome Centers throughout the state.

For more information contact 502-564-2080. To report a hazard or get help call the SAFE patrol directly at 1-877-367-5982.

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Photos



Gary Beckstrom (front) and Harvey Holbrook (back) assist a motorist by changing his tire.